



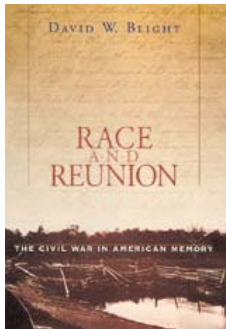
The Meaning of Civil War and Reconstruction

A Seminar by Dr. James Oliver Horton and Dr. David W. Blight

Sponsored by the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History for the National Park Service, March 17-19, 2003, Stephen T. Mather Training Center, Harpers Ferry, West Virginia

Reviewed by Ben Miller, HFC Staff Curator, Museum Design

Dr. Horton and Dr. Blight are long-time friends and supporters of the National Park Service. They are also attuned and sympathetic to the work of NPS interpreters in presenting history to the public.



Dr. Horton is the Benjamin Banneker Professor of American Studies at George Washington University and directs the African-American Communities Project at the Smithsonian Institution. He is the co-author of *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860*. Dr. Blight, professor of history at Yale University, is the author of *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*, which won the Frederick Douglass Book Prize in 2001.

***Race and Reunion, The Civil War in American Memory*, by David W. Blight, the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2001**

This seminar is part of a continuing effort by the National Park Service and the Gilder Lehrman Institute to broaden the interpretation of Civil War sites, as outlined in the draft paper, "An Initiative for the Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War, Interpreting the Civil War through the Sites of the National Park System:"

The National Park Service has not sufficiently used its sites to convey the true significance and breadth of America's Civil War experience. Nor have we demonstrated the relevance of the Civil War to all Americans . . . This unfortunate reality has its roots in both history and tradition . . . In the aftermath of the Civil War, we accorded the rights of the memory of the conflict to the veterans on both sides. They in turn fostered an astonishingly complete and swift reconciliation . . . Most of the legislation for America's battlefield parks is a legacy of the commemorative and reconciliatory efforts of veterans--conceived in a period where a visitor's understanding of context was assumed, when the ownership of the war's



memory, legacy, and meaning was unchallenged . . . We as a nation still use our battlefields to define the nation's Civil War experience in largely military terms--through the eyes of the participants of battle. We emphasize the military outcomes, with little discussion of the relations of those military events to [the] social, economic, and political evolution of the nation.

By broadening the interpretation of Civil War sites we can expand our understanding of the meaning of the Civil War and its aftermath and in doing so make its stories relevant to a greater number of visitors.

Dr. Blight opened the seminar with the question, "How did the Civil War transform America?"

This question has been asked since before the war ended. Abraham Lincoln pondered the question in his Second Inaugural Address (see www.bartleby.com/124). And the question has been answered, and will continue to be answered, in a number of ways. Drs. Horton and Blight explored how the nation has chosen to answer the question through the years. They interpreted both the history and the historiography of the Civil War and Reconstruction.

Slavery



Slaves at work on Pope's Plantation near Hilton Head, South Carolina, ca. 1863. Massachusetts Commandery, Military Order of the Loyal Legion and the U.S. Military History Institute.

National Park Service interpreters are expanding our interpretation of Civil War sites to present an understanding of the causes and context of the war. Dr. Horton presented primary sources to demonstrate that slavery was indeed the central cause of the Civil War and brought about secession. Alexander Stephens, Vice President of the Confederacy, under no illusion as to what the war was about, declared in 1861 that "our new government" was founded on slavery. Confederate partisan John Singleton Mosby wrote long after the war that, "The South went to war on account of slavery. South Carolina went to war--as she said in her secession proclamation--because slavery w[oul]d not be secure under Lincoln. South Carolina ought to know what was the cause of her seceding."



John Singleton Mosby, center with feather in hat, with some of his Rangers. National Archives.

Cotton Was King

Dr. Horton stressed the economic power of slavery. The slave/cotton economy was the basis for the South's cherished "way of life." In 1860 the South produced 7/8ths of the world's cotton. Cotton represented 57.5% of the value of all U.S. exports. 55% of enslaved people in the United States were employed in cotton production. There was money to be made in cotton--and a great deal to be lost by freeing the slaves. By the 1850s slavery was impossible to compromise away.

To those Southerners who were not slave holders (64% of the white population of the South) the secessionists played the "race card" and effectively appealed for the preservation of racial order expressed as the "Southern Way of Life" as a rationale for secession from the Union.



African Americans picking cotton ca. 1862. Engraving from a sketch by W.T. Crane shown in *The Soldier in our Civil War*, 1890, Vol. 1, pages 182-183.

"And the War Came"

Dr. Blight presented the ideas historians and others have advanced as to why the South seceded from the Union:

1. Protection of slavery (and a racial order)
The South had become a true slave society and to protect the institution of slavery was to protect the community.
2. The "Fear Thesis"
Fear of abolitionist sentiment and Republican power in the Federal government caused the South to see its loss of political power as a crisis to which it must respond.
3. Agrarianism
This thesis, advanced in the 1930s and '40s by Frank Owsley and others, argued that the struggle was to preserve a Jeffersonian ideal of a traditional agrarian society against Northern industrialism with its accompanying Yankee acquisitiveness and money grubbing.
4. Honor Thesis
Bertram Wyatt-Brown advances the idea that the South was defending a set of moral, personal, and community values by which Southerners defined their social

values and themselves. This was tied to the concept of "Southern Honor" --the notion that a person must be respected and must save face to maintain an honorable reputation. Disputes tended to be personal rather than disputes of law.

5. Nationalism

From the beginning of the war the question was asked as to whether Southern states secession from the Union represented a domestic insurrection, a rebellion, or a true revolution (the Second American Revolution) where the South was exercising a sovereign right.

Why Did the South Lose the War?

The South, of course, lost on the battlefield. The military turning points such as Gettysburg and Vicksburg have been well discussed. The fall of Atlanta in 1864 was politically significant in that it helped re-elect Abraham Lincoln as president. Lincoln himself had been pessimistic about his prospects for re-election.

The battle of Antietam was particularly important because the Emancipation Proclamation issued by Abraham Lincoln following the Union victory led to a redefinition of the meaning of the war. The war became a war to end slavery and this kept Great Britain and other European powers from entering the war on the side of the Confederacy. Emancipating the enslaved people of the South also changed the character of the war. It necessitated a Union strategy of unconditional surrender because the conflict was now recast as a war on the Southern people, their property, and their institutions.



Another idea advanced by historian Drew Faust attributes the South's defeat to a loss of will. The Confederacy did not develop a deep sense of nationalism or a deep revolutionary consciousness. While the North had a political structure and a political system, the South had none. Under the strains of war the collapse of this deep sense of nationalism led to defeat.

Dead soldier at Antietam. Photograph by Alexander Gardner, Library of Congress.

Death on an Unprecedented Scale

Dr. Blight reminded us that a discussion of the meaning of the Civil War must consider that the war brought massive death to American society. How did people cope with it? How did survivors account for the loss once the war was over? How were people's lives irrevocably changed? Walt Whitman, who saw the dead, dying, and wounded in hospitals, wrote extensive reflections on death and reconciliation in poems such as *The Wound- Dresser*, quoted by Dr. Blight. An excerpt follows:

"Bearing the bandages, water and sponge,
 Straight and swift to my wounded I go,
 Where their priceless blood reddens the grass, the ground,
 Or to the rows of the hospital tent, or under the roof'd hospital, To the long rows
 of cots up and down each side I return,
 To each and all one after another I draw near, not one do I miss, An attendant
 follows holding a tray, he carries a refuse pail, Soon to be fill'd with clotted
 rags and blood,
 emptied and fill'd again.
 I onward go, I stop,
 With hinged knees and steady hand to dress wounds,
 I am firm with each, the pangs are sharp yet unavoidable,
 One turns to me his appealing eyes - poor boy! I never knew you, Yet I think
 I could not refuse this moment to die for you, if that would save you."

Who Would Rule the South?

Dr. Blight presented Reconstruction--its successes and failures--as a referendum on the meaning of the war. This period of massive social and legal change raised questions never before raised or answered. How was the defeated South to be brought back into the Union? How was reconciliation to be accomplished? How would healing with justice be brought about? Who would control the process--the president or congress? What were the limits of black freedom? Was Reconstruction to be the preservation of the old or the creation of the new?

Abraham Lincoln saw Reconstruction as a "new birth of freedom" as stated in the Gettysburg Address. (See <www.loc.gov/exhibits/gadd>) Andrew Johnson, no friend to African Americans, wanted the Union and the Constitution to return to its pre-war form and looked to the past with the slogan, "The Union as it was. The Constitution as it is." The Radical Republicans in Congress saw Reconstruction as a far-reaching changing of society.

The Retreat from Reconstruction

The era of Reconstruction began with great promise for black freedom. The 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to the Constitution abolished slavery and gave African Americans (males, 21 years old or older) the vote. Equality for African Americans--the most radical ideal to come out of Reconstruction --seemed possible. But, as the title of Dr. Blight's talk stated, promises to African Americans were eroded by Southern resistance, Ku Klux Klan violence, and, in the end, Northern indifference and the desire of white America to put the Civil War--and the reasons it was fought--behind. As Dr. Horton stated, "American acts do not always come up to American ideals."



Cartoon by Thomas Nast from Harper's *Weekly*, October 24, 1874

The "Birth of a Nation"

In 1915 D. W. Griffith's cinematically brilliant and racist movie, "Birth of a Nation," coalesced the dominant American view of Reconstruction. To Dr. Blight the importance of this film can not be overestimated. The message of this movie, based on the novel *The Clansman*, by Thomas Dixon, was that after the shared bravery of the Civil War, the heavy hand of the Yankee oppressor upon the South permitted unscrupulous whites and venal, uneducated blacks to dominate the white majority and threaten white womanhood. Thanks to the heroics of the Ku Klux Klan the South was redeemed. The nation united under the shared banner of reconciliation and the return of white rule.



How did this one movie make such a lasting impression on American's view of Reconstruction? Not by the impact of the movie alone. By the time the movie was shown it gave visual representation to a racist view of Reconstruction shared by academic historians, novelists, most of the white public, and by Woodrow Wilson, 28th president the United States.

The Ku Klux Klan in Washington, D.C., March 1926. Library of Congress.

This was a view, according to Dr. Horton, rooted in assumptions, often based on "scientific" theories of racial inequality and anecdotal evidence, that were then "proven" by historians and sentimentalized by the Plantation School of southern writers.

Dr. Blight asked the question, "Why has Reconstruction history undergone such fundamental reinterpretations?" One reason is that historians began asking different questions of the past. Dr. Horton said that our interpretation of history changes, in large part, in response to current issues and concerns. Interpretations of the past are culturally rooted. Revisionism is an integral part of the process of the study of history. The William Dunning school of Reconstruction history that reflected the "Birth of a Nation" view addressed a need to justify the racist American society of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Today historians see Reconstruction as a progressive era that held great promise for African Americans. For example in 1875 Congress passed a public accommodations act that was much like the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The reaction was swift in coming. By the end of the 19th century the United States was locked into an era of segregation and inequality that would not substantially change until the Civil Rights era of the 1950s and 60s.

That the denial of Black rights was tied to the reconciliation of white America is a main thesis of Dr. Blight's *Race and Reunion*. The preservation of the memory of the shared valor and sacrifice of white soldiers came to overlay and submerge the memories of the horror and brutality of the war, the sacrifices and service of African Americans, and the very reasons for which the war was fought. White America reached cultural and political

accommodations that defined the "Negro Problem" as a local problem and African Americans as obstacles to national progress. The promises to African Americans made by Reconstruction and the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments would not be kept, if then, for a century.

Will the new perspectives on the meaning of Civil War and Reconstruction affect our interpretation of battles and battlefields? Speaking at the National Park Service Symposium, "Rally on the High Ground," Dr. Blight called the Civil War "a defining event upon which we have often imposed unity and continuity. As a culture we have often preferred its music and pathos to its enduring challenges, the theme of reconciled conflict to resurgent, unresolved legacies. The greatest enthusiasts for Civil War history and memory often displace complicated consequences by endlessly focusing on the contest itself. Over time, Americans have needed deflections from the deeper meanings of the Civil War."

To probe, present, and interpret those deeper meanings and to enable visitors to our parks to develop their own meanings are the challenges that we face.

Added Insights

- Dr. Horton made two interesting observations about Abraham Lincoln. One was Lincoln's capacity to change. Consider the way his views of African American freedom changed from the Emancipation Proclamation to the Second Inaugural. The second observation was that one should never underestimate Lincoln's political skill. In fact, part of Lincoln's skill was to count on being underestimated.
- Dr. Horton made the point that before 1825 slavery was a national institution. He also noted that American society has always been diverse, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural. We choose as a society not to present this fact to the world.
- *Apostles of Disunion*, by Charles Dew, is a book about the delegates sent by the seceding states to the other slave state conventions. This book provides insights into the minds of those Southerners who chose secession.
- Dr. Horton said that the interpretation of history changes, in large part, in response to current issues and concerns. Interpretation is culturally rooted. The interpretation of history is always revised from generation to generation.
- On the issue of States Rights how does the Fugitive Slave Law fit in? Promoted by the South, this was a federal law that overrode state laws to return fugitives to their owners.
- W.E.B. DuBois gave the commencement address to the graduates of Storer College in 1950.
- Why did the South insist on the expansion of slavery? Southerners had a vision of "the shrinking South." They were frightened that if slavery was contained it would be threatened. Slavery would be morally and economically discredited.
- Dr. Blight discussed the meeting of "memory" and "history." "How do you link the larger story to the personal memory of your listener or reader?"
- Dr. Blight cites Frederick Douglass as one who urged his listeners to not forget that the Civil War was fought by thoughtful men over ideas. The war was a "war of ideas, a battle of principles . . . a war between the old and the new, slavery and freedom, barbarism and civilization." This comment by comes from a Memorial Day speech in Madison Square, New York City, 1878.
- In the debate over Reconstruction, Thaddeus Stevens saw the seceded states as "conquered provinces." Charles Sumner claimed the states had committed "state suicide" and were unorganized territories, which must reapply for admission to the Union.

- As for the various interpretations of the era of Reconstruction: David Larsen suggests asking questions to draw meanings from your audience to find where they are rooted in culture and education and to suggest new meanings. Dr. Horton suggests academic historians can provide a basis for explaining changes in interpretation to an audience. Dr. Blight raised the issue of trust and commented that the role of the authority of historians has been under attack, often by political entities, as evidenced by some of the recent museum controversies, e.g. the Enola Gay exhibit at the Smithsonian.
- Slavery had been a means of social control. With the end of slavery how were four million black people to be controlled? The control of black people figured in the debate on Reconstruction.
- Dr. Blight characterized the Ku Klux Klan violence as political terrorism. The U.S. Senate hearings on Klan violence generated 14 volumes of testimony.
- Democracy failed in 1861 because the divisions were so great that the losing side could not accept the result.
- One legacy of radical reconstruction was the idea of interventionist use of Federal power and authority.
- Dr. Horton described a great exodus of African Americans in the 1870s from the South to Kansas and Oklahoma and to the urban South from the rural South. And also during the Reconstruction period African Americans traveled throughout the South seeking reunion with their families separated by slavery.
- On share cropping Dr. Horton said that the system could have worked if the sharecropper's rights had been protected. Overall there was collusion between federal and state governments in not protecting black civil rights. This was a means of re-establishing racial control.
- Dr. Blight stated that after the Civil War the "South was more conquered than convinced."
- In the past there was a tendency for the study of history to be compartmentalized. Today historians are saying that African American history (and other compartmentalized histories) must be considered as central parts of American history. They are attempting to reconcile this history with the larger study of history.

Required Advance Reading for the Seminar:

Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction* (Harper & Row, 1990)

Ira Berlin, et. al., *Free At Last: A Documentary History of Slavery, Freedom, and the Civil War* (New Press, 1993)

David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*. (Harvard University Press, 2001)

David W. Blight, "Race and Reunion: Soldiers and the Problem of the Civil War in American Memory," *North and South*, Vol. 6, Number 3, April 2003, pp. 27-38.

James Horton, "Confronting Slavery and Revealing the Lost Cause," *CRM*, Vol. 21, no. 4, (1998)

W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Propaganda of History" from *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880* (Harcourt Brace, 1935)

Bernard Weisberger, "The Dark and Bloody Ground of Reconstruction Historiography," *The Journal of Southern History*, November, 1959, pp. 427-47

Eric Foner, "Reconstruction Revisited," *Reviews in American History*, vol. 10, 1982

Speeches by Abraham Lincoln:

Gettysburg Address:

<<http://showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/speeches/gettysburg.htm>>

Emancipation Proclamation: <<http://www.nps.gov/ncro/anti/emancipation.html>>

Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address: <<http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres32.html>>

Additional Recommended Readings:

Charles Dew, *Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War* (University of Virginia Press, 2001)

William H. Freehling and Craig M. Simpson, ed., *Secession Debated: Georgia's Showdown in 1860* (Oxford University Press, 1992)

Kenneth Stampp, ed. *The Causes of the Civil War* (Simon & Schuster, 1991)

Emory Thomas, *The Confederate Nation* (Harper & Row, 1979)

Drew G. Faust, *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism* (Louisiana University Press, 1988)

Richard E. Beringer and Herman Hattaway, et. al., *Why the South Lost the Civil War* (University of Georgia Press, 1986)

Gary Gallagher, *The Confederate War* (Harvard University Press, 1997)

Paul Escott, *After Secession: Jefferson Davis and the Failure of Confederate Nationalism* (Louisiana University Press, 1978)

Steven Channing, *Crisis of Fear: Secession in South Carolina* (Simon & Schuster, 1970)

Richard H. Sewell, *Ballots for Freedom: Antislavery Politics in the United States, 1830-1860* (Norton, 1980)

Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (Oxford University Press, 1995)

Richard N. Current, *Lincoln and the First Shot* (Waveland Press, 1990)

Bruce Levine, *Half Slave, Half Free: The Roots of Civil War* (Hill & Wang, 1992)

David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass' Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee* (Louisiana University Press, 1989)

James O. and Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860* (Oxford University Press, 1997)

John McCardell, *The Idea of a Southern Nation: Southern Nationalist and Southern Nationalism* (Norton, 1979)

Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (University of North Carolina Press, 1996)

Allen W. Trelease, *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction* (Harper & Row, 1971)

Thomas Holt, *Black over White: Negro Political Leadership in South Carolina During Reconstruction* (University of Illinois Press, 1979)

Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (Random House, 1980)

James O. and Lois E. Horton, *Hard Road to Freedom: The Story of African America* (Rutgers University Press, 2001)

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